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ABSTRACT

The Families Communicate pilot project provides early intervention at the home campuses for students having discipline problems and their families. The interactive curriculum is presented in four sessions: (1) communication; (2) anger management; (3) conflict resolution; and (4) problem solving. Facilitators were trained, and the pilot project was implemented during the 1997-98 school year. Eighty students from six campuses participated with their parents in the four-session program. Goals of the pilot project include: (1) to increase the number of on-campus support programs for students and their families; (2) to increase the early intervention options principals have in working with students showing signs of persistent behavior problems; (3) to enhance staff skills in working with at-risk students and their families; and (4) to reduce the number of referrals for alternative education. Table 1 describes student characteristics. Table 2 shows rates of school attendance, discipline, and passing TAAS. A summary of student-parent joint evaluations is presented in Table 3. Suggestions for improvement of the program are reviewed in the text. Overall, the project was considered a success. Current data will provide a baseline for future project evaluations. (EMK)

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Austin Independent School District

Families Communicate Pilot Project
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During spring 1998, the Families Communicate pilot project was implemented in the Austin Independent School District. Using district alternative education funds totaling $10,875, campus staff trained to be facilitators were paid stipends to teach this student-family intervention at the campuses. The goals of the project were as follows:

- Increase the number of on-campus support programs for students and their families;
- Increase the early intervention options principals have in working with students showing signs of persistent behavior problems;
- Enhance skills of campus staff in working with at-risk students and their families; and,
- Reduce the number of referrals to the Dill School or the Alternative Learning Center (ALC).

Two facilitator-training sessions occurred during January 1998 in which three-person teams from each participating campus were to attend. Nine campuses (three elementary schools, four middle schools, and two high schools) sent staff for training, although all members of campus teams did not complete the full training. The two-day training consisted of instruction in the curriculum and teaching methods of both Positive Families (see Office of Program Evaluation Publication 97.06) and Families Communicate.

PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

During the 1997-98 school year, 80 students participated in the program which was implemented at six selected campuses. Table 1 shows characteristics of student participants in the program.

Table 1: Student Participants in Families Communicate

Families Communicate Spring 1998	Grade Span	Gender	Ethnicity	Low Income	Limited English Proficiency	Special Education
Elementary (n = 35)	Pk-5	54% Male 46% Female	17% African-American 54% Hispanic 29% Anglo/Other	83%	9%	14%
Middle (n = 30)	6-8	73% Male 27% Female	13% African-American 47% Hispanic 40% Anglo/Other	53%	3%	13%
High (n = 15)	9-10	53% Male 47% Female	20% African-American 73% Hispanic 7% Anglo/Other	60%	0%	20%

Source: AISD student master files

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

The primary focus of the program is early intervention at the home campus for students having discipline problems and their families. The interactive curriculum is divided into four topics, one per session: communication, anger management, conflict resolution, and problem solving.

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In most cases, students who were offered the program had a behavior record indicating a need for intervention. Parents (or other significant family members) and students had to agree to attend all four sessions of the course together. Schools provided meeting space and materials, and trained staff delivered the program. Trained facilitators were paid stipends for leading the program sessions, and they were asked to keep records on program participants in order to facilitate program evaluation.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Several variables were considered in evaluating the effectiveness of the Families Communicate Pilot Project. Table 2 includes selected academic and behavioral information on Families Communicate student participants for 1997-98. These data will serve as baseline measures to chart the impact of program participation on students over several years. For 1997-98, the average attendance rates of program participants was about the same as that of all AISD students, except at the high school level where program participants' average attendance rates were lower than that of all AISD high school students. Discipline rates for program participants were higher than that of all AISD students; this was due to the students' selection criterion for participation in the program. TAAS passing rates for program participants were lower than those of all AISD students, except the middle school Reading subtest, where program participants' passing rates were higher. In general, program participants seemed to have more difficulties regarding attendance, discipline, and academic achievement than the general student population. However, tests of significance have not been conducted, thus no inference can be made that these differences from the district averages were statistically significant in the current school year.

Table 2: 1997-98 School Attendance, Discipline, and TAAS Passing Rates - Program Participants

Families Communicate 1998	Average Attendance Rate Fall 1997	Average Attendance Rate Spring 1998	Discipline Rate 1997-98	TAAS Reading Passing Rate*	TAAS Math Passing Rate*	TAAS Writing Passing Rate*
Elementary	97%	95%	29%	54%	40%	57%
Middle	95%	94%	23%	50%	35%	71%
High	87%	85%	40%	25%	0%	25%

*Note: Percentages are based only on the numbers of students who took the TAAS, not all students in the program.
Source: AISD student master files

Upon completion of the course, students and family members filled out a course evaluation that asked participants about skills learned from the course. Table 3 indicates a summary of participant evaluation responses; the majority of respondents seemed to have gained some helpful communication skills from the course. In addition, when asked about what they liked most in Families Communicate, respondents most often mentioned the games/activities, and the opportunities to problem-solve, communicate and express their thoughts and feelings. When asked about what they liked least, the length of the program and scheduling problems were mentioned by some (e.g., not enough sessions, or different time of day). Consequently, the most common suggestions for improving the course were to add more sessions (or make current sessions longer). Other participants wanted the course to cover more topics, such as communicating and dealing with stress, peer pressure, grief, drugs, fighting, dating/relationships, and other parent-child issues.

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Table 3: Student/Parent Course Evaluation Summary

Evaluation Questions	Percentages of Responses
I have a better understanding of how my family communicates.	No 6% **Yes 79%** Don't Know 15%
Our family agrees on ways to improve family communication.	No 5% Yes 40% **Sometimes 55%**
I feel comfortable showing respect and being respected.	No 0% **Yes 78%** Sometimes 22%
I feel I am better able to control and express my anger.	No 8% **Yes 50%** Sometimes 42%
I understand the need for "Win-Win" solutions and know ways to achieve them.	No 3% **Yes 74%** Don't Know 23%
The way I communicate with others at school/work will improve because of what I learned in these sessions.	No 2% **Yes 82%** Don't Know 16%
I feel that my family's ability to solve problems together has improved.	No 5% **Yes 55%** Sometimes 40%

Source: Parent-Student Evaluation

At the end of the school year, campus facilitators met to discuss the program. The facilitators indicated that the Families Communicate program was well received by students, parents, and teachers from their schools. Some suggestions were made for program improvement, including the following:

- Provide a greater variety of activities for use in program;
- Provide incentives to participants in order to improve recruitment and attendance; and,
- Provide more training opportunities to increase the number of available facilitators, and to enhance facilitator skills of those already trained.

In an interview, the program manager noted that the program should be expanded to other schools, including those that had trained facilitators but were not able to implement the program during 1998, as well as all middle schools in the district. Another issue the program manager mentioned was that schools implementing the program should have a specific criterion for referring students to the program. This will enable schools to offer the program consistently and at the criterion discipline offense level. Finally, the program manager indicated that summer training opportunities were made available to those campus staff teams that wanted to implement the program in the 1998-99 school year.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Since this was the first time that Families Communicate had been implemented, some necessary program implementation adjustments were made (e.g., scheduling, facilitator familiarity with the curriculum, etc.). In addition, since this was the first time students and their families had participated, the information collected from them provides a baseline for following up some important academic and behavioral variables in the future. This long-term data will provide a better indication of program impact and effectiveness. Considering the immediate feedback from program participants and course facilitators that was described previously, the Families Communicate program appears to have been received well and has helped families begin to address some of the difficulties facing students.

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